



CONGRESSMAN HENRY A. WAXMAN NEWS

2444 RAYBURN H.O.B.
8425 WEST 3rd STREET

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515
LOS ANGELES, CALIF. 90048

202 -- 225-3976
213 -- 651-1040

CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
by HENRY A. WAXMAN
(D-Los Angeles)

May 2, 1983

"HEALTH CARE FOR THE UNEMPLOYED"

Two weeks ago I introduced a bill to provide basic health care for people who are jobless and without private health insurance.

When the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment held hearings on this bill, every member was deeply moved by the testimony we heard. It was obvious to us that for a substantial number of unemployed people, the loss of health insurance is as great a blow as the loss of their weekly paycheck.

The vast majority of Americans with health insurance are insured through the company for which they work. The equation could not be simpler: no job = no health insurance.

The loss of income that unemployed people experience is compensated for, in part, by drawing unemployment insurance. However, the loss of health care coverage is not compensated for in any way. The person out of work usually has too much in assets to qualify for Medi-Cal; yet he or she seldom has enough in savings to pay costly medical bills out of pocket.

The consequences of no health coverage for the unemployed are tragic. In some cases a family's life is disrupted by having to sell their home and move to a cheaper area. In other cases the results are worse. Lacking a means to pay for health care leads to repeated postponement. Often by the time the patient is absolutely forced to seek the medical care he cannot afford, the disease has advanced so far as to be beyond treatment.

Our current non-system is not only inhumane, it is also costly and inefficient. Hundreds of millions of dollars are wasted in treating emergencies which could easily have been prevented with low-cost, early detection and treatment.

High blood pressure in its earliest stages can be both diagnosed and successfully treated for less than the cost of a movie and a meal. This common disease usually shows no symptoms at first; yet it can be detected by any trained health professional in seconds. Undetected high blood pressure is one of the most common causes of strokes and heart attacks. These two health disasters can cause death, irreversible brain damage and a host of chronic ailments and disabilities.

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It is far from certain that my bill will be enacted. Such key Reagan Administration spokesmen as Budget Director David Stockman have already begun to play their theme song: "It costs too much." I expect a spirited debate--the respected Los Angeles Times has given my bill strong editorial support.

My bill to provide basic health insurance for the unemployed is not cheap. Has anyone ever heard of quality health care that is cheap? However, neither is it a mindless giveaway. The benefits my bill would provide are modest by any measure.

The bill would allow for nine days of hospital care and 10 visits to a physician, clinic, or emergency room per year. Special rules would provide adequate treatment for pregnant women and newborn babies.

I am indignant at the bizarre notions which President Reagan and some of my congressional colleagues have about what kind of spending is worthwhile. They don't even blink when one dubious weapons system after another is proposed with price tags in the tens-of-billions of dollars.

It is my deep belief that our country would benefit more from a program on health care for the unemployed than from either the MX missile system or the enormous military assistance being given to right-wing dictators in Latin America and elsewhere. Nothing will ever divert me from the basic principle that saving lives and preserving health is a fundamental function of our government.

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